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A while back, BP America honcho Stephen Elbert made a telling remark about all the furor stirred by the company's plans to dump more pollution into Lake Michigan. "We are a lot of things," Elbert said. "Stupid, I hope, is not one of them."

On Thursday BP America Chairman and President Bob Malone proved that. He announced that his company would do the smart thing: It won't discharge more pollution into the lake.

But Malone added a warning: The company could be forced to cancel the \$3.8 billion expansion project to process more heavy crude oil from Canada, if it cannot be done under the old limits.

We hope it doesn't come to that. We're optimistic that alternate technologies or other strategies can be developed to keep the project on track while protecting the lake. A consultant hired by Chicago recently ticked off several possibilities for alternate technologies that could help BP expand without increasing pollution. (Estimated cost: no more than \$40 million.) BP has also agreed to collaborate with scientists at Argonne National Laboratory and Purdue University Calumet's Water Institute "to identify and evaluate emerging technologies with the potential to improve wastewater treatment across the Great Lakes," Malone said. That sounds promising.

As we've said, we like jobs and gasoline. The Whiting, Ind., expansion promises more of both. But our overarching point on lake pollution remains: No backsliding. No company or city should be allowed to dump any additional pollution into the lake beyond what is already permitted. For the health of the entire region, the needle on the Lake Michigan pollution gauge needs to move in only one direction: Toward zero.

It's inspiring that more than 100,000 people signed petitions urging the company to think again about dumping more ammonia and fine particle pollution into the lake. And that the U.S. House voted overwhelmingly, 387-26, to urge Indiana to reconsider the permit. Mayor Richard Daley, Gov. Rod Blagojevich, Sen. Dick Durbin and Reps. Rahm Emanuel, Mark Kirk and Judy Biggert all deserve credit for helping steer the company toward the right answer for Lake Michigan. So do the many regular citizens who voiced their displeasure.

BP listened. (Did execs hear Eddie Vedder of Pearl Jam leading the Lollapalooza crowd in a guitar-driven chant "Don't go BP Amoco"?) The company re-evaluated. And then it did what many companies -- most people -- find difficult: It changed its mind. It backed down. There's one final step: Indiana needs to amend the permit, to enshrine BP's promise and to warn others against backsliding.

Much was made in this controversy about BP's image as a company that cares about the environment. As Elbert said recently: "We've got 5,000 BP employees that are concerned, not only about the contamination but about this smack on the company." With this announcement, BP has lived up to its advertising and taken a giant step toward erasing that smack.